



DISCIPLESHIP IN CANADIAN CONGREGATIONS

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Introduction

Canadian church leaders, across theological sectors, agree that an important dynamic to congregational flourishing is discipleship.

If you randomly spoke with a dozen church leaders you would likely find that each person says discipleship is important; however, definitions of what discipleship is or how discipleship of congregants takes place would vary. It is likely that level of satisfaction with discipleship across and within congregations will be mixed.

In our 2021 book, [*Signs of Life: Catholic, Mainline, and Conservative Protestant Congregations in Canada*](#), we devoted an entire chapter to discipleship. Based on the feedback we received from a small sample of churches, the topic of discipleship was a particular area of interest. In this report we focus on the topic of discipleship to provide a quick snapshot of some of the data we acquired; this builds on interview and focus groups data with over 100 Canadian church and denominational leaders, plus a national non-representative sample of Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant congregations in Canada. These findings emerged from over 250 congregations and 9100 participants, in all thirteen Canadian provinces and territories, including a range of church sizes, age groups, and rural and urban contexts. Some denominational groups that we feature had as few as a couple hundred participants up to thousands of people respond to our survey. For those interested in more detail about our method and sample, please see pages 7-11 in [*Signs of Life*](#).

In this report we will share how those who participated defined what they meant when talking about discipleship, the expressed need for discipleship processes to be intentional, the main factors which were perceived to impact the spiritual growth of the disciple, the role of congregational environment, and how discipleship was understood to help people to grow spiritually. We will then briefly touch on the impact that COVID-19 has had on discipleship efforts and how the pandemic may impact discipleship going forward. Our hope in sharing our findings is that churches of various denominations may be able to apply the information and insights to their own contexts.



Defining Discipleship

It is important to understand what church leaders mean when they talk about discipleship. The traits, conceptions and labels associated with discipleship vary, from disciples making disciples to spiritual disciplines and formation, meaningful involvement in Christian community, participating in the sacraments (e.g., Eucharist), spiritual experiences, living in Godly ways in one's day-to-day life, and living a transformed life. As we will see below, different conceptions of how to define, pursue, and practice discipleship will reflect theological particulars for understanding and interpreting God, Scripture, the Church, and society. That is, Catholics, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals might come at this subject quite differently.

Discipleship Occurs in Intentional Ways

A key insight to arise in our research is that spiritual formation and discipleship rarely happen by accident in congregational settings. Let us first look at the data based on our survey results in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

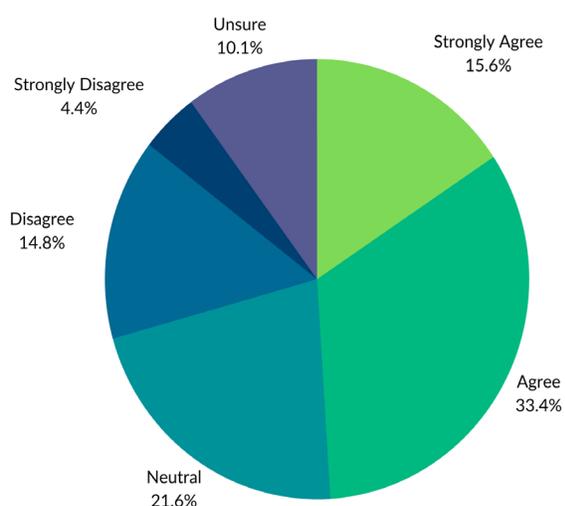


Figure 1. Explicit Discipleship Process in Congregations (“Your parish/congregation has an explicit discipleship process for people who wish to grow in their faith”)

Regarding the presence of explicit discipleship processes in Figure 1, we see that just under 50% strongly agreed (15.6%) or agreed (33.3%). The remaining 51.1% were either neutral (21.6%), didn't agree (disagree 14.8%, strongly disagree 4.4%), or were unsure (10.1%). The data are clear that roughly half of respondents are not confident that their church has an explicit discipleship process for people who want to grow in their faith. Although simply having an explicit discipleship process does not mean that people will grow in their faith, our research indicates that those who do have an explicit discipleship process are more likely to foster an environment where people do grow in their faith. Intentionality is central.

We see in Figure 2 how church size is related to explicit discipleship processes, as reported by pastoral leaders. Generally, as the congregational size becomes larger (the exception being the 100-199 category), pastoral leaders report more explicit discipleship processes. The larger a congregation, the more essential it is to develop explicit structures and processes that help its many members to grow spiritually.

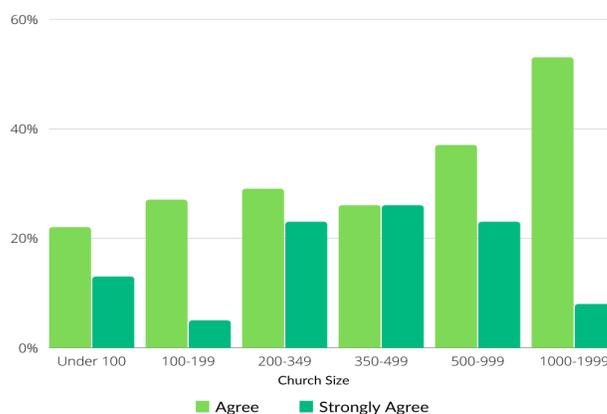


Figure 2. Explicit Discipleship Process Based on Congregation Size: Pastoral Leaders

These observations are extended when we look at congregations believed to be growing, declining, or staying the same in size. Figure 3 shows that 62% of those in growing congregations believe their congregation has an explicit discipleship process. By contrast, in declining congregations only 36% are aware of an explicit discipleship process, with congregations who are staying the same in size at 47%. We do not mean to suggest that growth/decline is synonymous with flourishing, though data are clear that demonstrable differences do stand out between growing and declining congregations. These data should be understood as a general observation and not a direct correlation.

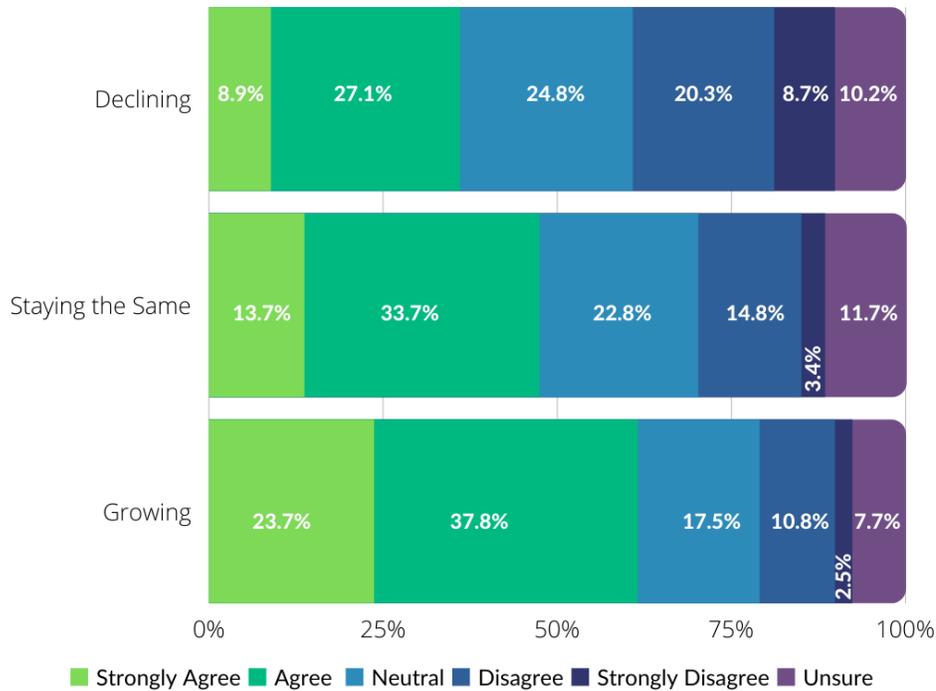


Figure 3. Explicit Discipleship Process, by Churches Growing, Staying the Same, and Declining in Size

We can see from the data that based on pastoral leaders and congregants/parishioners alike, a great opportunity exists to make discipleship processes more explicit toward helping congregants grow spiritually, particularly in those churches which are increasing in size and dealing with greater numbers of people.

Practices that Enhance Spiritual Growth

In what ways do congregants learn the faith? What actions or practices help congregants seek the kingdom of God? We know that discipleship can and does happen in multiple ways, both inside and outside of the congregational setting. Given our interest in congregations we centre our attention on how the congregation helps to enhance the spiritual growth of its congregants. To get at this, we asked congregants about the elements that most impacted their spiritual growth in and through their local church. Figure 4 points out that preaching/teaching/homily was the most important factor that impacted the spiritual growth of congregants at 68%. This is followed by singing/music (45%), Eucharist/Communion (35%), volunteering in the church (26%), prayer 17%, and small group participation (16%).

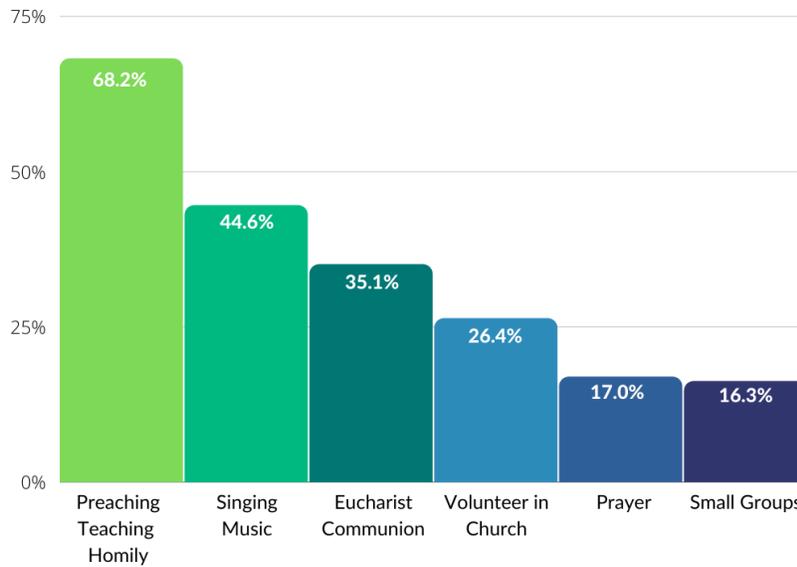
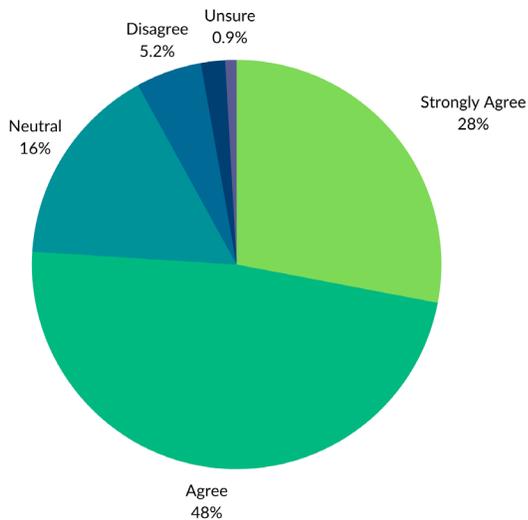


Figure 4. Most Important Elements of Congregational Life to Impact Spiritual Growth (“Which three areas do you most value in your current parish/congregation?”)

It is clear that the most formative activities (except small groups and volunteering) take place at worship service/mass. The question we would pose is if church leaders see these formational elements across the congregation’s life as part of the discipleship process? The data indicate that worship services are vitally important in the formation of disciples, but to what extent are services intentionally treated this way? Are worship services the only context for preaching/teaching/homily, singing/music, Eucharist/Communion, volunteering, and prayer to happen? Of course not, however, when we look at the data in Figure 5 we see these services are an important part of the discipleship process.



How does corporate worship impact the discipleship process for the individual? We explored several factors which were positively correlated with spiritual growth, including intellectual stimulation, emotional stimulation, sense of the Holy Spirit, and worship services that challenge congregants to take action in their life. Corporate worship is not just about knowledge transmission, it is a performative practice that includes hearts, minds, and bodies. If intentionally designed, executed, and engaged holistically, ritual can nurture a unity between doctrinal beliefs and embodied practice. If ritual is viewed and crafted in this way, then it comes as no surprise that theological context/tradition matters to how spiritual formation and discipleship arise in and through corporate worship services.

Figure 5. Mass/Worship Service Challenges You to Take Action in Your Life (“Your masses/worship services challenge you to take action in your life (e.g., profession, family, spare time)”)

Figure 6 is telling when the top three modes of spiritual formation are broken down by the top eight denominational traditions represented in our national survey (we provide the six most cited categories overall).

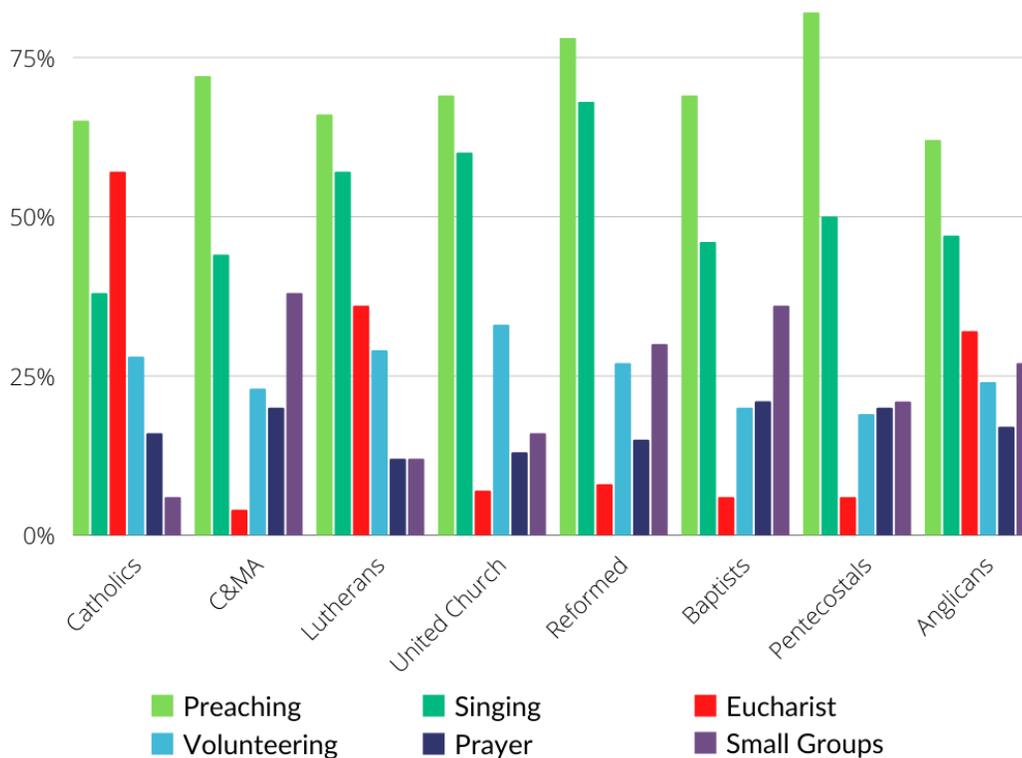


Figure 6. Three Most Important Elements That Impact Spiritual Growth by Denominations (“Identify the three most important elements of parish/ congregation life that impact your spiritual growth”)

We see that for Catholics, next to preaching/teaching/homily, the Eucharist is the most important element to impact spiritual growth at 57%. By contrast, for conservative Protestants such as the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), Baptists, and Pentecostals, the Eucharist/Communion was 4%, 6%, and 6% respectively. When it comes to volunteering in the church, mainline Protestants like the United Church of Canada (33%), Lutherans (29%), and Anglicans (24%) find volunteering helpful in their spiritual growth. Small groups are identified by conservative Protestants congregants as an element that impacts their spiritual growth (C&MA, 38% and Baptist, 36%), much more than mainline Protestants (United Church of Canada, 16%) and Catholics (6%). When examining social justice initiatives as an important element that impacts spiritual growth, United Church congregants came in at 22%, in contrast to Baptist congregants at 4% and C&MA congregants at 2%. Given that this survey sample is non-representative, we are less interested in getting caught up with the particular percentages associated with each theological tradition, but rather we find it noteworthy to stress that theological sector seems to matter greatly for what practices people deem important for their spiritual growth. The data demonstrate that discipleship is perceived and developed in diverse ways, and is influenced by the context in which one is discipled.

For those that wish to explore effective ways for an individual believer to mature in their faith (beyond corporate worship) we would highly recommend exploring the research and methodologies performed by LifeWay research. This information can be found at: “Discipleship Pathway Assessment,” <http://discipleshippathwayassessment.com/about/>

When thinking about discipleship in your own context we have provided some reflection questions.

Reflection Questions

for Congregational-Based Discipleship Processes

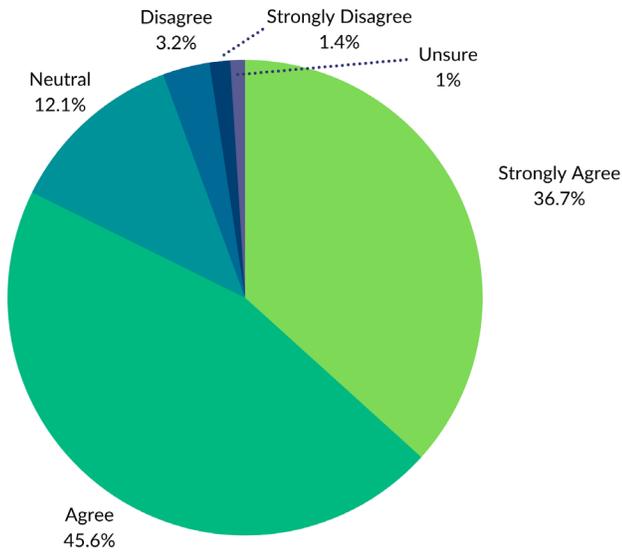
1. In what ways is the worship service/mass intentional about discipleship?
2. Overall, what are the greatest strengths of your discipleship process?
3. What areas need to be strengthened or improved in your current discipleship process?
4. Does your parish have clear entry points for growing as a disciple?
5. Do you have a support system to train disciple-makers to help multiply your effectiveness and broaden your reach?
6. Can you communicate your discipleship process as part of your vision easily?
7. Can you communicate the discipleship process easily in under 2 minutes (broad strokes)? Have you communicated it enough so that your lay leaders and congregants can do so as well?
8. How can you inspire congregants to take a next step instead of just informing them of what is available in respect to discipleship?
9. What areas need to be expanded with more programming or needs to be extended to engage more people in our current discipleship process?
10. What new initiatives need to be created to address gaps in the discipleship process, respond to new needs and challenges, or engage new audiences?

The Environment for Discipleship

Outside of worship services, discipleship also happens in other congregational-based places and contexts that impacts congregants' spiritual growth (e.g., small groups or volunteering). We wanted to explore the potential links between environment and discipleship, notably the relationship between a congregation that has helped a congregant to grow spiritually and three other factors: (1) "Your congregation is a safe place to explore the Christian faith;" (2) "You have a strong sense of belonging in your congregation;" and (3) "People take great care of one another in your congregation." We'll spare you the complex statistical tests to explore these relationships, but the results reveal a strong positive relationship between these variables. An increase in any of the three factors could be correlated with increases in spiritual growth of congregants.

The data indicate that the strongest factor that impacts spiritual growth is that the congregation is a safe place to explore the Christian faith, followed by a strong sense of belonging in one's congregation, and lastly that people take great care of one another in the congregation. Congregants need to feel safe to explore and ask questions and express doubt about the Christian faith. This speaks to the level of trust that congregants have for one another. Having a strong sense of belonging and being cared for by others in the congregation addresses the quality and responsibility of the community and defines it. Regardless of location, it seems these factors are the conditions which set forth spiritual growth in congregations.

Discipleship and Growing Spiritually



Now it is time to explore the question of whether or not congregations actually help people to grow spiritually. Figure 7 reveals that 82% of congregants “agree” and “strongly agree” that their local congregation has helped them to grow spiritually. This is not surprising as people tend to attend congregations where they believe they are growing spiritually; otherwise, they leave that church in search of another.

When comparing growing and declining congregations (see Figure 8), we once more see variation. Just over 90% of congregants in growing congregations believed that their parish helped them in their spiritual growth. In contrast, the figure was just over 70% in declining congregations

Figure 7. Your Church Helps You to Grow Spiritually (“Your parish/congregation has helped you to grow spiritually”)

Although the results indicate that only 9.1% of growing congregations, 16.3% in those staying the same in size, and 28.3% in declining contexts were “neutral,” “disagreed,” or “strongly disagreed” with this statement, it is valuable to consider how congregations might do better in helping its congregants to grow spiritually. In his 2020 article that is available online, “An Agenda for the Future of Faith Formation,” John Roberto offered some helpful reflections and ways to assess discipleship as a lifelong process. He suggests ten characteristics of maturing faith.

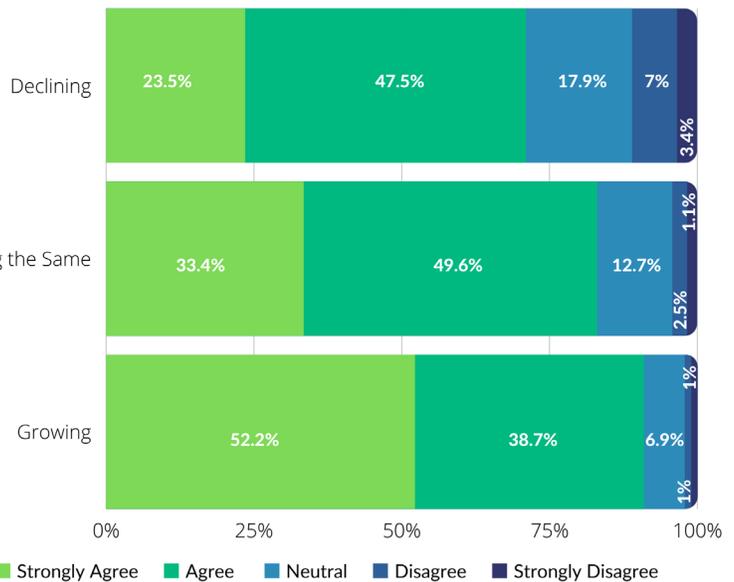


Figure 8. Your Congregation Helps You to Grow Spiritually, by Churches Growing, Staying the Same, and Declining in Size (“Your parish/congregation has helped you to grow spiritually”)

10 Characteristics of Maturing in Faith

1. Developing and sustaining a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ.
2. Living as a disciple of Jesus Christ and making the Christian faith a way of life.
3. Reading and studying the Bible, and its message, meaning, and application to life today.
4. Learning the Christian story and foundational teachings of one's particular Christian faith tradition and integrating its meaning into one's life.
5. Praying—together and by ourselves—and seeking spiritual growth through spiritual practices and disciplines.
6. Living with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and values.
7. Living the Christian mission in the world—serving those in need, caring for God's creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace—locally and globally.
8. Worshipping God with the community at Sunday worship and ritual celebrations, and through the seasons of the church year.
9. Being actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the faith community.
10. Using one's gifts and talents in the Christian community and in the world.

COVID-19

Of course, the pandemic is shifting *what* congregations are doing to address the spiritual formation of their attenders, as well as *how* they are accomplishing these goals. Our limited anecdotal conversations and experiences with church leaders during COVID-19 reveal mixed approaches to discipleship. For some, the same central modes of discipleship persist, albeit in different forms (e.g., online versus in-person). For others, the whole conception and practice of how best to disciple Christ-followers for the current and anticipated contextual realities is being turned on its head. We would do well to pay careful attention to this full spectrum of discipleship activities.

It is too early to tell, but we are all wondering what place the corporate worship gathering will play in discipleship activities after COVID-19. Will other forms of discipleship rise to the forefront as more essential to spiritual formation, while corporate worship gatherings diminish in importance? We have no doubt that there are many strong views (theological and practical) about what should or should not arise relative to corporate worship services and other discipleship practices in the long term. However, as churches proceed down these roads, the underlying caution that we would offer is that if churches believe that discipleship is important, it is incumbent on congregations to clearly articulate for their community what discipleship is, why it is important, and how their specific community will seek to disciple congregants both as part of worship services and beyond in people's day to day activities. As our findings have shown, though there is no universal approach to defining and practicing discipleship, being active, intentional, and clear in discipling activities is of utmost importance.

We would be remiss if we did not single out that spiritual formation occurs online for some via watching services, sermons, or music sets from the global Christian leaders, listening to podcasts, or engaging with family and friends on social media on topics of interest to Christ-followers. COVID-19 has not changed that this reality exists; it has merely changed how prevalent this reality could become as a key source of one's discipleship habits. What role local churches play in this process, to possibly leverage technological outlets to actively shape its members' spiritual lives through online engagement (e.g., podcasts, vlogs) may well be one of the most pressing opportunities that churches will need to embrace to anticipate the trend after the pandemic. Many churches flourishing in Canada today, and who will flourish tomorrow, will have an effective online presence, while considering those ideas which we have presented in our data and findings.

Next Steps?

Are you interested in learning more about discipleship in a Canadian context, along with many other topics (e.g., engaged laity, leadership, innovation, evangelism, or neighbourhood involvement)? We'd encourage you to pick up our book, [Signs of Life](#), which is full of empirical data, theological reflection, and practical insights on the Canadian Church for the Canadian Church.

Have you considered having your entire congregation complete a Canadian-based congregational survey, to assess areas of strength and opportunities for development? Visit our website at www.flourishingcongregations.org for more information on steps to do so.

Our Institute also networks with church leaders and scholars across Canada to provide free content twice a month. You can access this content by signing up for our newsletter on our website, plus you can see other materials under the Resources tab.

Suggested Resources on Discipleship

Bonhoeffer, D. (2004). *Discipleship: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4*. Fortress.

Breen, M., & the 3DM Team. (2011). *Building a discipling culture: How to release a missional movement by discipling people like Jesus did* (2nd ed.). 3 Dimension Ministries.

Geiger, E., Kelley, M., & Nation, P. (2012). *Transformational discipleship: How people really grow*. B & H Publishing Group.

Holtom, J., & Johnson, D. (2015). *Bullseye: Aiming to follow Jesus*. United Church Publishing House.

Im, D. (2017). *No silver bullets: Five small shifts that will transform your ministry*. B & H Publishing Group.

Kelly, M. (2012). *The four signs of a dynamic Catholic*. Beacon Publishing.

Ogden, G. (1998). *Discipleship essentials: A guide to building your life in Christ*. InterVarsity Press.



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